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An Inquiry into the Psychological Effects on Parents of Artificial Insemination with Donor Semen

THE DESIRABILITY OF a systematic, close follow-up of couples with children begotten by donor-insemination, is beyond doubt. Very little has so far been published on this subject, however, and we are still in need of information about the psychological after-effects of AID.

Naturally such an investigation can only be carried out by those whose material on cases of artificial insemination with donor semen is sufficiently large. But this is certainly not the only reason for the scarcity of publications.

Some doctors hold that it is not ethical to keep in touch with their patients after successful AID. They consider this an intrusion into private lives to which they had been only temporarily admitted. To continue this beyond the treatment could be a quite unnecessary reminder of the child's origin. Others suppose that the marriages remain happy, and that the children are well integrated, on the evidence of the numerous expressions of gratitude they receive in the way of letters, pictures, Christmas-cards, even after many years, as well as applications for a second child by donor insemination. These arguments, however, can at best be valid only for couples from whom one has heard in one way or another. But what about those who remain silent?

Only a comprehensive approach, embracing all the couples with donor-inseminated children, can throw light on this question.

In 1954 Farris and Garrison² reported on an inquiry by means of a questionnaire, sent to each spouse of nineteen couples with children conceived by donor insemination. Two questions had to be answered:

1. Why did they choose donor insemination rather than adoption?
2. Would he or she desire to have another child conceived by the same method?

The answers were very positive. All thirty-eight spouses replied that they desired a second child by AID.

Jackson⁴ has published her experiences with donor insemination. She had kept in touch with most of her former patients and concluded: "The results on the whole are extremely encouraging, the children are rather above the average mentally and physically and, with one exception, the marriages have been consolidated and improved".

Favourable experiences have also been communicated by Cary,¹ Kleegman⁵ and many other authors. Rutherford and Banks⁶ consider the after-effects on the family of AID children to be as good as those with adopted children. Haman³ feels that adoption causes more conflicts and therefore should be ranked second to AID. None of these communications, however, is based on a systematic follow-up.

The Present Study

To obtain some information on the after-effects of AID on marital happiness and the relations between both spouses and the child or children begotten by donor insemination, a

questionnaire was sent to each spouse of all the couples—none excepted—which had conceived by means of AID during a period of ten years and eight months. This period coincided with the time between my first giving this treatment until six months before the inquiry was held.

Ethical Considerations

It must be admitted that I had to overcome some hesitation before starting this investigation. It is my opinion that, as a rule, every contact with the couple should be broken off as soon as results are attained, in view of a quite understandable but undesirable emotional tie with the doctor who inseminated. But considering, on the one hand, that this fairly impersonal inquiry was by mail and for once only, and on the other hand that such an investigation was felt to be necessary, I decided to overcome my scruples and carry on.

Another point to consider was professional discretion concerning the nature of the treatment. I had therefore to use a rather cryptic text, understandable only to the people concerned in case the forms and the added introductory letter should fall into the wrong hands.

Methods

The introduction ran:

"Dear Mr. and Mrs. X:

Some time ago I was in contact with you and for this reason I am now asking your kind co-operation. You could help me a great deal by answering the enclosed questionnaires. They can contribute to a better insight and understanding of the connections between marital relations and parenthood.

The idea is that each of you fills in his/her own form individually, preferably without even the partner knowing the other's answers, and mails it separately in the enclosed envelope. Of course your anonymity will be fully respected.

Please do not put your name or address on the form or envelope. May I hope for a prompt reply?

Thanking you in advance for your very kind co-operation, of which my investigation depends, I remain. . . ."

The wording of the questionnaire is reproduced below.

QUESTIONNAIRE

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1. Which partner are you?</p> <p>2. How many children have you?</p> <p>3. Please state their age and sex.</p> <p>4. Is it/are they according to your wishes?
If not, how should it have been?</p> <p>5. Is it/are they healthy?</p> <p>6. Whom does it/do they resemble?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>If the resemblance is not striking, do you find it</i></p> <p>7. Have you the feeling that something is lacking in your attitude towards the child/ren?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>If so, do you think it is due to the circumstances known to both of us?</i></p> | <p>Please cross out the wrong answer
the husband / the wife</p> <p>yes / no
[110]</p> <p>physically: yes / no
[109] [1 died at 1 yr.]</p> <p>mentally: yes / no
[109]</p> <p>physically: Father/mother/not evident
mentally: father/mother/not evident
[see below]</p> <p>unimportant/a pity/annoying
[97] [3] [1]
[9 did not answer]</p> <p>yes / no
[1] [109]</p> <p>yes / no
[1] [109]</p> |
|---|---|

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- | | |
|--|---|
| 8. <i>Do you sense that the partner feels likewise?</i> | yes / no
[1] [109] |
| 9. <i>Did the coming of your child/ren influence your happiness in life?</i> | the same/increased/decreased
[1] [109] |
| 10. <i>Did the coming of the child/ren influence your marital relations?</i> | the same/closer/less good
[64] [46] |
| 11. <i>Did you expect a different course of things? Were your expectations</i> | more/less beautiful than reality
[This question, intended as a check on questions 9 and 10, was misunderstood by many couples, and the replies were inconclusive.] |
| 12. <i>Does your parenthood cause you inner conflicts?</i> | yes / no
[5] [105] |
| <i>If the answer is "yes", what are the reasons?</i> | religious grounds/towards child/
[1] [2] |
| <i>(Please state as fully fully as possible.)</i> | towards partner/other reasons
[1] [1] |
| | [replies discussed below] |
| 13. <i>Has it been difficult for you not to talk about it to other persons?</i> | often/sometimes/never
[11] [99] |
| 14. <i>If you were ever placed again in the same circumstances would you—with your present experience—choose the same way?</i> | yes / no / doubtful
[105] [1] [4] |
| 15. <i>Comments and remarks:</i> | |

To ensure the absolute reliability of this inquiry (and to serve as possible evidence against false accusations) I invoked the aid of a notary public (in Europe a more official authority than in the United States). The forms were numbered and stamped by him and put into pre-addressed envelopes in his presence. We posted those letters together. From the returned questionnaires, bearing no names or addresses but only the mark of the notary, I obtained the data and arranged them for this report. The forms were then deposited with the notary, who verified the data presented in this paper against the answers on the forms.

Material and Results

A total of 116 forms were sent to fifty-eight couples. No selection was used other than that the first AID child was born between 1st January 1951 and 1st September 1961. I took the last date—six months before this investigation—as a limit so as to exclude over-enthusiastic parents of newborn first babies. There were 110 replies, 95 per cent of the total—an exceptionally fine return for an inquiry, and one which clearly shows the positive attitude of the couples involved.

According to the data on these fifty-six couples, they had a total of eighty-one children, an average of about 1.5 children per family.

The sex ratio was forty boys and forty-one girls. Kleegman's finding of an extreme predominance of male AID children was not confirmed in my material, in which both sexes are almost equally represented.

The ages of the children at the time of this inquiry (March 1962) ranged from a few weeks to nearly eleven years. (The newborn babies were not, of course, firstborn children because of the deadline I had set; first children had to be at least six months old.)

Actually these couples conceived ninety-three times during that period (from 1.1.51 till 1.9.61), but twelve pregnancies ended in miscarriage or still-birth (almost 13 per cent). Kleegman reports 20 per cent.

"Own" Children

Two of the men in the inquiry knew of their sterility before marrying. No. 70 had an adult son by his first wife and, being Jewish, was sterilized by the Germans during the occupation of Holland; he re-married after the war.

No. 92, who likewise married for the second time, also knew of his sterility.

No. 19 was subfertile from the onset of his marriage, but his wife conceived during a short remission; he became totally infertile in the subsequent years, and the fervently desired child second was begotten by AID.

One man, No. 5, has normal fertility. Most unfortunately, however, there exists Rhesus antagonism between him and his wife. The latter is Rh-negative and during her first pregnancy (1945-46) which turned out to be extra-uterine, she received a blood transfusion with Rh-positive blood. She had developed antibodies to such a degree that every subsequent conception by her husband ended in abortion. Thus insemination with donor semen was indicated.

Four initially infertile husbands (Nos. 42, 52, 58 and 98) showed a spontaneous remission of their infertility after their wives had already conceived children by AID. Each of these men begot a child (three girls and one boy), in the thirteenth, eleventh, sixth, and eleventh year of marriage respectively; these four children are included in the total number of eighty-one mentioned above. Yet well-known specialists had judged the chances of these men producing fertile spermatozoa as so infinitesimal that the couples were given to understand they must have no expectations; I confirmed this pessimistic prognosis which was subsequently disproved.

I know that I hereby supply opponents of AID with an argument in their favour, but the facts are undeniable. On the other hand I may mention that these four cases of spontaneous recovery have in the long run only casuistic value. The average poor prognosis in these infertile males is not affected by these exceptions. An average of ten years of barren married life, moreover, is not very encouraging, and may be a definitely unfavourable influence when the woman is ageing. Finally I hold that such mistakes as have been made only argue for better diagnostic and prognostic methods, and not against AID.

Extraordinarily interesting, of course, are the present reactions of these four couples in view of their earlier AID children. In this respect I can mention only very positive facts.

No. 42 phoned me enthusiastically: "Think doctor! we are getting another child this time by ourselves!" I replied that I was very glad for them, but regretted that it could not have been foreseen, because in that case I would not, of course, have helped them with getting their first two. His reaction was one of sincere indignation: "But then you would have withheld from us all the happiness we've had in the past years? Well, doc, I am glad you could not foresee it!"

No. 52 writes on the questionnaire: "We got a girl later on, as my condition improved. Both children are equally dear to us."

No. 58 called on me and expressed himself in a similar way.

No. 98 writes: "As you can see from the questionnaire we got a third daughter last year on our own. We are very happy and content with our whole family."

For that matter these four couples answered in the affirmative question 14, reading: "*If ever again you were placed anew in the same circumstances, would you—with your present experience—choose the same way?*" This agrees with their communications.

So much for the data produced by the first three questions.

The Children

Question 4 was: *Is it/are they according to your wishes?* Only being able to choose between yes/no, all unanimously replied with "yes".

Question 5, concerning the *physical and mental health of the children*, was also answered in the same way with one exception, i.e. a child who died when one year old. It had a congenital, not hereditary, atresia of the bile ducts.

Question 6 was a dual one, reading: "*Whom does it/do they resemble: a. physically, b. mentally?*" People could choose out of three answers: "father/mother/not evident". Most replies were "mother" and a few "not evident". This question, not very interesting in itself, was only a preamble to the next one: *Do you find it unimportant/a pity/annoying?* Only three persons, two female and one male, considered it "a pity", one woman found it "annoying"; 97 persons considered it "unimportant". On nine forms this question remained unanswered.

Question 7 is also a dual one: *Do you have the feeling that something is lacking in your attitude towards the child/ren? If so, do you think that this is due to the circumstances known to both of us?* Except for one man (No. 13) who answered both questions with "yes" (see the discussion on the problems of this couple under question 12 below) the answers to the first part of this question were all "no".

Question 8 is meant to be a cross-check on the answer of the partner to question 7: *Do you sense that your partner feels likewise?* Again only No. 13 answered "yes"; everybody else, including No. 13's wife, replied "no".

Question 9: *Did the coming of your child/ren influence your happiness in life?* allowed for the following answers: "the same/increased/decreased". Only No. 58 (female) answered "the same"; yet her other answers show that she would again choose the same way of conceiving a child if she should want one.

Apart from this woman, the other 109 persons involved in this inquiry all indicated that their happiness had been increased after having the child.

The Marriages

Very positive are the answers to question 10: *Did the coming of the child/ren influence your marital relation?* The choice in answering lay between: "remained the same as before/became closer/became less good". Nobody used the last reply; sixty-four answered: "the same as before", sometimes with additional remarks such as "was always good". Forty-six reported "closer". In this category this was the answer of both spouses in sixteen couples (thirty-two persons out of forty-six), while there was a discordance in the answers of fourteen couples, proving their individual and independent answering. In the total we see that in thirty out of the fifty-five couples one of the partners at least indicated improvement in the marital relation. Obviously, this does not warrant the conclusion that the marriages of those who answered "the same as before" were less good than the other ones; as was explicitly stated several times, their marriage was good and remained good.

The third alternative, that after AID the marital relation had deteriorated, was not answered in the affirmative on any questionnaire.

All this shows clearly that the often used postulate, that AID may endanger the marriage, is completely without foundation.

Problems

Question 12 is important. The first part is: *Does your parenthood cause you inner conflicts?* Having to choose between yes/no Nos. 3, 13, 14, 24 and 55 answered "yes", the others (105 persons) said "no".

The second part of this question, *If the answer is "yes", what are the reasons: on religious grounds/towards the child/towards the partner/other reasons?*, concerned only the five people who replied in the affirmative to the first part.

The answer given by No. 3 (female) indicates that she felt she had wronged her child:

"The child has given us happiness, but would not *her* happiness be increased by having a few little brothers or sisters?" (a further treatment with AID resulted in an abortion).

One couple, Nos. 13 (male) and 14 (female), reported conflicts. The husband gave as his reason: "towards the partner" and his wife: "towards the child". This makes sense because the mother is constantly in fear of losing the child, who has been ill quite a few times. The husband feels guilty towards his wife because he opposed her conceiving a second child. He reasoned: "this time everything went all right and both of us accept the child wholeheartedly, but will this be the same with the next one?" His wife did not agree and even discussed this matter with me but after a few talks she gave in, at least apparently; but she writes in her explanation: ". . . the child has been ill many times. In the past two years, recurrent otitis media has been treated by paracentesis twenty-three times. During this time I had many feelings of guilt towards the child and, although this seems contradictory, of resentment towards my husband for denying us another child, as you know. Although I know his arguments, and should respect them, this has its repercussions on our marital life. If we had foreseen this, I believe that we should have opted for either two or none. Both my husband and I have fully accepted the child as our own, and in that we are more than happy."

Here we have a marital conflict on a neurotic basis, of a type often found in "normal" families. The fact remains however that, seen in retrospect, it is doubtful whether in this case AID was indicated. In fact, I did initially refuse (partly because the woman was then anorgastic during coitus) and referred her to a psychotherapist. This colleague insisted upon AID, which was done nearly one year later, after the woman had acquired an orgasmic potency, but obviously she was still too neurotic and the indication was not well founded.

Although the wife of No. 24 reports that her husband has no conflicts regarding parenthood, he himself writes: "As an active member of the Christian Reformed Church I found it difficult to decide. . . . The Bible teaches us repeatedly that the Lord sends us prosperity and adversity . . . such as deprivation of the richness of having offspring. . . . On the other hand we Christians certainly may make use of the possibilities offered to us by science. All this comes to mind when one has to make a decision. But ultimately it is the narrowness of one's own conscience that determines one's decision. . . . I think one cannot give a clear answer once and for all. An orthodox Christian does not think on the same lines as a less strict believer; . . . these things must be solved personally. When I have to decide again, I will think it over anew in the same way. I do believe, seeing the great daily joy we derive from the blessing of a child, which is a blessing of God, that I will decide positively again." (Three years later he and his wife requested another AID treatment.)

No. 55 (male) just states "other reasons" without further elucidation.

Scrutinizing these five persons who admitted conflicts after becoming parents, we find that three were not caused by AID as such, but by having only one child. The fourth had religious difficulties which he solved himself in a positive way. The fifth gave no explanation but his reasons were apparently neither of a religious nature nor caused by wife or child. It seems to me that all this, together with the other 105 replies, denying any conflicts from parenthood, certainly do not compare unfavourably with parents whose children were conceived in the natural way.

Question 13: *Has it been difficult for you not to talk about it with other persons?* could be answered by "often/sometimes/never". Ninety-nine answered "never", eleven "sometimes". But the motives in the latter group were understandable and not serious. No. 12 writes: "At the beginning I felt rather uneasy towards my parents". Our "problem-couple" (Nos. 13 and 14) also answered with "sometimes". No. 41 enlarged on his "sometimes" with: "sometimes one wishes to show this solution to other childless couples". No. 107 adds to her "sometimes": "towards our family doctor", whom she evidently wants to take

into her confidence. No. 110 explains: "sometimes when talking with very good friends and when they ask 'no second baby coming yet'?" The other five did not offer any further explanation.

No. 14, the final question, was: *If ever you were placed again in the same circumstances, would you—with your present experience—choose the same way?* Answers to choose from were: "yes/no/doubtful". Only four indicated "doubtful": our problem couple Nos. 13 and 14, No. 64 (although she had stated that her happiness in life was increased and that the marital relation had become closer after the child's coming), and No. 86, who had also reported increased happiness.

Very surprising indeed is No. 69's explanation. He has been previously mentioned as the man who was sterilized by the Nazis. He is the only one who answers "no", and writes: "My wife is inattentive to my son from my first marriage and this displeases me much!" This son was at that time twenty-one years old! No. 69 had also indicated his increased happiness after having a second child, this time by AID; it is therefore quite probable that his "no" was meant solely for internal use—to show this answer to his wife. (Three years after this inquiry I met him by chance, and on that occasion he repeatedly expressed his gratitude for my help!)

The others, 105 persons in all, wrote down "yes", sometimes with exclamation marks or underlined.

Comments

Because it is often claimed that AID leads only incidentally to positive results, I reproduce here an interesting *documentation humaine*: an anthology of the remarks which the people concerned added spontaneously to their questionnaires.

No. 4 (male): "... undoubtedly we would make the same choice, if possible even more than once. . . ."

No. 7 (male): "Life is totally different now, with a real purpose."

No. 15 (male): "I realize that you need these data for your work, but I wish you had not done this. The reason is that I am hardly ever conscious of the fact that the children are not my own, and I do not want to be reminded. Apart from this they are darlings and I am very proud of them."

No. 24 (male): "You did not make things easy for us at the time; we have realized since that there were sound psychological reasons for your attitude and that, if it had not been our whole-hearted intention to enrich our marriage with a child, we would have given up. We have also appreciated your straightforwardness in pointing out the pros and cons. The treatment as such did not trouble me in any respect, and in fact it gratified me that you insisted upon my presence."

No. 25 (female): "We are very happy with our child. She is a smart little thing and just the same dark type as my husband."

No. 27 (female): "You must have noticed that we are completely content and happy with our daughter. . . . I am very glad to show you in this way our great joy in our child".

No. 28 (male): "Before my daughter was born I was sometimes afraid that later on I would get conflicts with my conscience and would be unable to consider her as my own. It turned out so different! I am crazy about my daughter and never regard her as anything but my own child."

No. 33 (male): "Fatherhood does not cause me any conflicts, although I do wonder sometimes what the child would have been like if it had been my own. The only thing that troubled me terribly was the idea of failing as a man. Getting to know you was a godsend and this obsession has completely gone now that we have this child. I feel rich!"

No. 35 (male): "Cannot understand why some people reject this method. The child

resembles me in so many ways (especially psychologically) that my relatives remark on it. . . . I only regret that one cannot pass this experience on to people of whom one knows so that they could be made much happier. Instead of rejecting it, physicians and clergymen should undertake the task of informing people who suffer from a barren marriage of this solution."

No. 42 (female): "Even between ourselves we never discuss it any more."

No. 45 (female): ". . . if a marriage is really a good one and both spouses are sincerely longing for children, especially the husband, I can advise everybody to do as we did. We are a really happy family and . . . I surely believe that many people would think exactly the same if this were better known."

No. 46 (male): "I am still grateful when looking at *my* children."

No. 50 (male): ". . . the most important thing is that it is never discussed with anybody; in my opinion, this is why my attitude towards the children can be spontaneous."

No. 70 (female): "I am always touched to see my husband handling the child so lovingly. He simply adores the little boy and he puts the child above anything else."

No. 72 (female): "We are happy with each other and love the children much and we are convinced that we are not having more difficulties with them than we would have had under normal circumstances."

No. 83 (male): "Without taking this step my wife would undoubtedly have become a nervous wreck; she is a born mother. It means for me a vast richness. For both of us our marriage has remained an excellent one—largely because of this!"

No. 92 (male) "The test person of this questionnaire knew of his sterility before he married for the second time. He was a widower, and . . . marrying again was justified only because he as well as his second wife could call upon AID. His wife could not have faced a childless marriage or an adopted child with equanimity. There were no tensions while discussing, preparing for and performing AID. During pregnancy, and during the time between the delivery and now, the child has been integrated in the thoughts and feelings of his parents entirely as one begotten in the natural way. As to the attitude of the person whom this form concerns, it may be added that it is not his impression, either emotionally or rationally, that the child conceived as a result of AID affords less than complete fulfilment of fatherhood."

No. 95 (female): "During . . . the last half year I have wished it again because it is after all great to be allowed to expect a child together in this way."

No. 96 (male): "During the past years our entire life has changed in so many respects and become so much happier. I swell with *healthy parental* pride and cannot imagine a different way of life.

No. 107 (female): "More and more I catch myself in remarking: just like daddy!"

No. 109 (female): "Next week our child will be four years old and we would so much like to have one more. Are you willing to help us? In that case as soon as possible! We long for it, also on behalf of the little boy."

No. 114 (male): "At the start I had fears of losing my children because the Lord may not have intended fatherhood for me. But maybe other parents are now and then also afraid of losing theirs. Without the children our marriage would have failed."

No. 116 (male): "I consider our little daughter entirely as my own. She is my greatest possession. As to your treatment, it exceeded my expectations. . . ."

Conclusion

On the whole, this inquiry clearly shows that, in carefully selected cases, AID increases joy in life, often intensifies and certainly, in my experience, has never harmed marital relations. Conflicts of conscience very seldom occur, at least not in well-selected cases, and

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it is our positive impression that the experiences of those involved in this inquiry are in no way inferior to those of average parents.

Summary

An inquiry carried out by means of questionnaires among fifty-eight couples with children conceived by donor insemination, being the entire material of cases thus treated by the author during eleven consecutive years, had a return of 95 per cent. In both spouses this inquiry disclosed almost unanimously favourable results with regard to marital as well as parental happiness.

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